
Government of the District of Columbia



Department of Consumer and Regulatory Affairs

Testimony of

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Acting Chief Tenant Advocate

***BILL 16-757,
“INDEPENDENT OFFICE OF THE TENANT
ADVOCATE ESTABLISHMENT ACT OF 2006”***

Committee on the Consumer and Regulatory Affairs

Honorable Jim Graham, Chair

Council of the District of Columbia

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Room 500

John A. Wilson Building

1350 Pennsylvania Avenue, NW

Washington, DC 20004

10:00 a.m.

Good morning Council Member Graham and members of the Committee on Consumer and Regulatory Affairs. I am Johanna Shreve, Acting Chief Tenant Advocate in the Office of the Tenant Advocate at the Department of Consumer and Regulatory Affairs. I am here this morning to present testimony concerning Bill 16-757, the “Independent Office of the Tenant Advocate Establishment Act of 2006.”

Under the Fiscal Year 2006 Budget Support Act of 2005 the Committee recommended, and the Council approved, the formation in 2006 of the Office of the Chief Tenant Advocate (OTA). The purpose of the Office of the Tenant Advocate is to advocate, educate, and provide outreach to tenants and the people of the District. As established, the OTA reports directly to the Director of the Department of Consumer and Regulatory Affairs (DCRA). Bill 16-757 proposes to have OTA become an independent agency in October 2007. Both the DCRA Director, Patrick Canavan, and I are not averse to this ultimate goal, mindful that the current interrelationship significantly facilitates tenants needs today and is vital to the effective future growth of the OTA.

As stated in the Committee on Consumer and Regulatory Affairs report and recommendations on the budget request for Fiscal Year 2007, the Committee

received anecdotal and testimonial evidence that for the OTA to ultimately fulfill its mission as an advocate for tenants, it would have to do so at arms length from DCRA's other functions. An independent agency whose primary mission is to service those needs can assure the public at large that this government is committed to ensuring that housing is a top priority. It further enhances the public's perceptions that the District of Columbia is committed to protecting the rights of tenants' whether it is in the sale and conversion of a building, or the basic, fundamental rights to decent, safe and sanitary housing.

DCRA's primary functions are to regulate most business activities, construction and construction safety, enforce building codes and license and regulate most businesses, occupations and professions throughout the District of Columbia. During the FY 2006 budget process this Committee revitalized the District's consumer protection laws and created two new offices at DCRA- the Office of Consumer Protection and the Office of the Chief Tenant Advocate. In light of this mandate, DCRA has provided the OTA the foothold on which to build. The close proximity to the housing and rental accommodations operations in DCRA has allowed the OTA to quickly become grounded in the critical issues that affect tenants in the District of Columbia and to work to address these concerns. DCRA has provided the critical support structure for OTA as it has begun to evolve.

The Chief Tenant Advocate, as part of DCRA, also has a positive impact on the operations of housing regulation at DCRA by proactively addressing issues of concern and speaking forcefully for District tenants.

I am confident that OTA will continue to be strengthened over the course of FY-2007 and will be well equipped to function as an independent agency in FY-2008. However, with the creation of an independent agency this committee will also be faced with a challenge of providing adequate funding to ensure that the agency is staffed with qualified assistance. The law provides for nine (9) full time employees (FTEs), which is a good start but insufficient to ensure that the agency is able to carry out its mission adequately.

Bill 16-757 also includes the responsibility for the management and administration of the Housing Assistance Fund. Most of the recent legislation proposed by this Committee strengthens the Office of the Tenant Advocate's ability to ensure that building conversion fees are collected in a timely manner, and to generally serve the needs of those most negatively impacted by the sales/conversion process. These functions are currently a part of DCRA's Rental Accommodations and Conversions Division. Moving these management and administrative functions to the OTA will better assist the financial and relocation needs of those unable or

unwilling to become homeowners during a conversion process. The current legislation ensuring this requires constant coordination and monitoring of conversion requests to ensure that owners contribute the required funds needed to assist tenants impacted by these building conversions. This will require a sound automated information system that can track all conversions through the sales process, an accounting system that records the input of funds, and the dispensation of those funds that tie into the Agency's annual reporting requirements.

Over the course of the next several months, I will more specifically identify the additional staffing and resource needs for the new independent OTA. We want to ensure that the independent agency will become the District of Columbia's beacon of light for all tenants by providing legal and technical support, state of the art information on housing issues at both a local and federal level, a repository of housing data needed to assist in the design of a local affordable housing policy, and educational tools to help tenants organize and sustain themselves.

Thank you for this opportunity to provide comments today. I am available to answer any questions you may have.